

Between the Known and the Possible, Design Project reflection

This reflection summarises the preliminary outcomes of my graduation research and design project. It discusses my chosen methods, motivations, the effect of feedback on project development, and the way I plan to complete the final stages of my project. It evaluates the effectiveness of my process, its academic and social relevance, and the relationship between the research and design.

1. Relationship between my graduation topic and the masters track and programme

The topic of my graduation project – post conflict reconstruction in Sana'a, Yemen, through the design of a girl's school – is deeply rooted in the ambitions of the Architecture track in the AUBS programme. They both emphasise socially embedded design, spatial design in complex context, and architecture as a tool for social and cultural resilience.

The project combines aspects of architectural design, urban considerations, social research, climate responsiveness, and cultural sensitivity. By building my design based on post-conflict theory, vernacular architecture, and community engagement, I connect architectural thinking to a broader urban and societal recovery process, showing the interdisciplinary and contextual ambitions of the AUBS master's programme.

2. Interaction between research and design

Throughout the project, research and design were in constant dialogue. The research initially helped start the design process, while later the design informed further research directions. The two parts of my project continuously influenced each other.

Research influencing design:

- Post-conflict theoretical framework, such as place attachment theory and resilience, helped me position the school not just as a functional institution but rather as a site of psychological and cultural recovery.
- Studying Yemeni vernacular architecture provided spatial guidelines (courtyards, thresholds, climatic strategies, materiality) that shaped the overall organisation of the school.
- The conversations I had with family and friends back home exposed the tension between modernisation and cultural identity. This helped create the conceptual foundation of my design: "the familiar and the unfamiliar."
- Case studies of Beirut and Aleppo highlighted the downsides of reconstruction processes that prioritise profit or aesthetics over rebuilding identity. This pushed me to ensure that my project has a community-centered and socially impactful programme.

Design influencing research:

- The start of my design process showed that the vernacular architecture research needs to expand beyond domestic typologies. This led me to revisit the material and spatial guidelines and reinterpret them for a public building.
- The decision to design a girls' school allowed me to conduct research on educational systems in Yemen, gender disparities, and specific programmatic expectations, refining my understanding of the social context.

This back-and-forth relationship allowed the project to evolve beyond research translated into design; but it became an investigation into how theory and tradition can shape new architectural opportunities.

3. Assessment of my approach and methods

In my graduation plan, I suggested a clean-cut approach in which my research focuses on producing a list of design guidelines – based on theoretical lenses, vernacular architecture exploration, and the analysis of existing case studies – that are then used to create my design project.

This approach initially worked as intended. The combination of theoretical and vernacular research strengthened the scope of my design. Giving me a strong understanding of culturally sensitive design approaches within the Yemeni context. Learning from existing case studies also helped solidify my design position. However, the research didn't result in a 'copy and paste' list of design guidelines. Rather it highlighted the importance of contextual understanding and project-specific design. The initial approach helped me realise that certain aspects of the research (theoretical framework and vernacular principles) could be replicated in various design programmes, however, it is not as simple as creating a 'ready to use' list for everyone.

This forced me to look at the graduation project differently. To view the relationship between my research and design not as a linear relationship but as two components in continuous dialog. This iterative process gave rise to the idea of "the familiar and unfamiliar" which helped create a clear narrative that could be used across different forms, programmes, materials, and climate strategies. Nevertheless, this process demanded more time than I had expected, specially when moving from conceptual diagrams to spatial organisation and climate integrated solutions.

4. Academic and societal values of the project

Academic value:

The project contributes to ongoing discussions on post-conflict reconstruction by demonstrating how vernacular principles can be reinterpreted rather than replicated. It proposes a hybrid earthen-timber construction system that can be adapted to local needs and climate conditions. Lastly, it links social theory to design decisions through the lens of the in-between spaces. It shows that reconstruction can be both culturally grounded and forward-looking.

Societal value:

The project addresses the educational (specifically gender-related) need in Yemen. By choosing to design a girls' school that is safe, culturally sensitive, and socially engaging, the project supports the larger recovery of communities after a conflict. The incorporation of community-built elements (textiles, walls, wooden frames or window screens) and a shared community block emphasizes local participation, employment, empowerment, and long-term ownership. The project shows that one can be culturally sensitive while also indicating opportunities for growth and change.

Ethical aspects:

Ethical considerations heavily impacted the choice to design a school rather than a more commercially driven programme or residential quarter. It also influenced decisions around privacy, safety and cultural appropriateness. The project aims to enhance dignity and identity rather than impose external ideals and beliefs.

5. Transferability of project results

Though the research didn't produce a clear 'ready to use' design list many elements of the project can be applied to other contexts in Yemen and similar conflict-affected regions:

- The hybrid construction system that combines vernacular earth techniques with modern timber structures.
- The idea of using in-between spaces as social and educational infrastructure.
- Community participation through cash-for-work programmes.
- Climate-responsive strategies based on passive design systems.
- Conceptual framework of balancing familiar with unfamiliar possibilities.

While the school programme is specific, the underlying logic could guide future reconstruction efforts of community centres, clinics, or even housing developments.

6. Reflection on feedback

Feedback from mentors played a huge role in clarifying the direction of the project. Early critiques pushed me to strengthen my theoretical foundation of the design concept and avoid relying purely on vernacular imitation. This led to a deeper exploration of the familiar/unfamiliar design elements.

Further feedback on the importance of spatial clarity and stepping away from abstract ideas when transitioning into more technical drawings helped me refine the site plan, reorganise the building block, develop a more coherent circulation strategy, and explore the use of sketch models as a design method.

I also learned to prioritise climate design more explicitly. Many passive systems are sufficient in providing a comfortable environment within the context. I also learned the need to trust my own ideas and knowledge. Overall, the feedback continually sharpened the project's identity and my approach towards it.